The Perennial Trashing of Bourgeois Democracy

Walter Berns

I recall a faculty party at Cornell, the day after the annual Fourth of July celebration at the University football stadium. A wife of an economics professor, when asked if she had enjoyed the fireworks, replied, "Yes, but I could have done without all the flag-waving." This reminded me of that familiar old song—familiar in some circles, at least—"If you don't like my peaches, why do you shake my tree?"

As in Ithaca, New York, so, apparently, in Ann Arbor, the home of the University of Michigan. The following statement comes from an article by a professor of English titled, "Dissing the Middle Class":

> [Inhabited largely by professors], Burns Park is hardly a typical American middle-class neighborhood, as evidenced by the practice of one contentious colleague of flying the American flag on patriotic holidays so as, he claims, to annoy his neighbors.[1]

This phenomenon is not peculiar to America, or to this time. Indeed, some sixty-odd years ago, George Orwell remarked much the same thing in England. "It is a strange fact," he said, "but it is unquestionably true, that almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during 'God save the King' than of stealing from a poor box."[2] What accounts for this?

Orwell attributed it to what he said was the fact that English intellectuals were ashamed of their own nationality. As to that, he would of course know better than I, but it seems to me that *shame* alone does not explain it, certainly not shame as Hobbes defined it—as grief caused by "the discovery of some defect of ability." It was surely not because they *grieved* for England that four of them—Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean, Kim Philby, and Anthony Blunt—spied for the Soviet Union. Orwell was probably closer to the truth when he said English intellectuals were Europeanized, taking "their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow." Of course, a Paris *crème caramel* rather than an English suet pudding, but why Moscow's Marxism rather than Britain's liberal democracy? The answer has something to do with the fact that, especially after Adam Smith, liberal democracy became bourgeois democracy.

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Just as it was in England that the idea of liberal democracy was born—I refer, of course, to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke—so it was in England that opposition to, or dissatisfaction with, liberal democracy was first manifested. By this, I do not mean the champions of the old or traditional political idea—monarchy or divine right; Locke presumed to have disposed of that in the first of his *Two Treatises of Government.* I have in mind certain poets who defended what they called *culture,* and foresaw that John Locke's, and after him, Adam Smith's principles would lead to a commercial society, a society with no secure place for culture as they defined it, in a word, a "bourgeois" society.

Although not the first to use the term as it is now employed, the Scotsman Thomas Carlyle (in the 1860s) spoke of "culture" as the body of arts and learning separate from the "work" or "business" of society. This definition has the merit of reflecting (and that very clearly) the problem that gave rise to the "culture" movement in the early nineteenth century. Carlyle was preceded by the poets Coleridge, Keats, and especially Wordsworth (who, in his role as poet, saw himself as an "upholder of culture" in a world that had come to disdain it); and by Shelley (who said that "society could do without Locke, but not without Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Shakespeare"); and by John Stuart Mill, for whom "culture" meant the qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity, or those aspects of our humanity that he foresaw might be absent in a liberal democracy. His famous essay, *On Liberty,* was written with this in mind.

But it was the great English historian and man of letters, Thomas Babington Macaulay, who explained the source of what the poets saw as the problem. I quote from his essay on Francis Bacon, where he compares the old philosophy with the new:

> To sum up the whole, we should say that the aim of the Platonic philosophy was to exalt man into a god. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to provide man with what he requires while he continues to be a man. The aim of the Platonic philosophy was to raise us far above vulgar wants. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to supply our vulgar wants. The former aim was noble; but the latter was attainable.[3]

It was left to America to demonstrate the extent to which Macaulay and Bacon were right.

In 1776, we laid the foundation of a regime that would secure our unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What we did with these rights was up to us; more to the point, it was left to each of us to define the happiness he has the right to pursue. He might—*we* might—seek eternal salvation in another world, or, on the other hand, find happiness by acquiring the goods of this world. The government was to have nothing to do with this, other than to provide the conditions making it possible. This was to be done, in the one case, by guaranteeing liberty of conscience, and, in the other, by

securing the property right—or as James Madison put it in the celebrated Tenth *Federalist*, by securing the "different and unequal faculties of acquiring property." He went so far as to say that this was "the first object" of government.

To repeat: guided by the new political philosophy, we established a commercial republic, peaceful and prosperous, and peaceful, in part, because it is prosperous. The Constitution secures our rights, including the right to be—or not to be—*cultured*. The choice is ours. We can spend our leisure time reading the Bible, Petrarch, Dante, Shakespere, and listening to the music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, or, on the other hand, by going to the movies, watching MTV or, thanks to modern science (which is protected by the Constitution—see art. 1, sec. 8, cl. 8) gaping at internet porn. We enjoy the right to do the one or the other. As someone once said, the Constitution gives rights to vulgarity as well as to culture.

What began in nineteenth-century Britain as a serious critique of the new liberal democracy became, in twentieth-century America, a contemptuous "bourgeois bashing," almost a way of life for some of our campus radicals. But if not American liberal democracy, with all its vulgarity, then what? What's the alternative? Our intellectuals might, with reason, prefer Parisian *crème caramel* to American apple pie, but they cannot, with reason, prefer Moscow's Marxism to America's liberal democracy, if only because Marxism suffered an un-Marxist—i.e., unhistorical—death in Moscow.

Orwell, to get back to him, accused the intellectuals of his time of being unpolitical, of living in the world of ideas and having "little contact with physical reality." The same might be said of some of ours: Martha Nussbaum, for example, a Harvard classicist but now a professor of law, as well as of ethics, philosophy, and divinity (a veritable polymath), at the University of Chicago, and author of the lead essay in a book entitled, *For Love of Country*. It ought to be titled *For Love of Nowhere*.

Nussbaum is a cosmopolitan, and an advocate of what she calls cosmopolitan education, according to which students should be taught that "they are, above all," citizens not of the United States, but, instead, "of a world of human beings." Patriotism, as we ordinarily understand it, is a problem, she thinks, because it leads to parochialism, or "partisan loyalties." "Only by making our fundamental allegiance to the world community of justice and reason do we avoid these dangers."[4] But where is this world community to which we can pledge our allegiance? The United Nations?

In fact, of course, this country, however numerous its imperfections, is now, as Abraham Lincoln said it was in 1862, "the last, best hope of earth." It is this because the cause of justice, equality, tolerance, human rights, all the values Nussbaum favors, depends not on the so-called World Community—Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, China?—but absolutely on this country and the willingness of its citizens to defend it against its enemies. She

fails to appreciate this country and the fact that there is nothing narrowly partisan about its patriotism.

Lincoln made this clear in his eulogy on Henry Clay. Clay, he said, "loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity and glory, because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity and glory, of *human* liberty, *human* right and *human* nature." (Emphasis added.)

In closing, I refer to an article by John Judis in *The New Republic* some time last year.[5] He had attended a conference in New York City on "globalization and independent politics," sponsored by the Nation Institute, George Soros's Open Society Institute, the Carnegie Institute, Barnard College, Columbia University, and the City University of New York—in a word, a conference of academics. As one might expect in such a gathering, the speakers accused America of being racist, sexist, imperialistic, and, generally, a place where no decent person would choose to live. Among the speakers was a professor of politics at one or another branch of the University of California, who said the "two-party system is a sanctuary for middle-class, white-skin [that is, bourgeois] privilege." Not to be outdone, a female member of the audience repeatedly complained of "brown tap water."

Judis said he had intended to stay for Ralph Nader's luncheon address, but, instead, packed his suitcase, headed for Penn Station, and caught the first train back to his quiet home in the Washington suburbs where, he said, people think "white-skin privilege" is a kind of hand cream, and, when faced with "brown tap water," call the plumber. And also, I would add, where they love this country and, when necessary, are prepared to take up arms in its defense.

Notes

1. Gorman Beauchamp, "Dissing the Middle Class," in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1995): 336.
2. George Orwell, "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius," in *Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters of George Orwell, vol. 2, My Country Right or Left,* ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: David R. Gordine, 2000), 75.
3. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays* vol. 2 (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1997, 1953), 353.
4. Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," in *For Love of Country,* ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 6, 8.
5. John B. Judis, "Bad Trip," *New Republic,* 13 November 2000, 42.